Mystery of Stateroom No. 480

Photo by WHITE

One of the Newest Photographs of Marie Empress.

How Did Marie Empress, the Famous Tragedian Edmund Kean's Great-Grandniece, Vanish—Unheard and Unseen—from the Thronged Liner "Orduna"? What Drew Her Into Oblivion, from Its Brilliantly Lighted Decks Into the Cold, Black Waves?—Mysterious Ocean's Latest Enigma!

Photo by NATIONAL

Marie Empress as She Appeared in the London Theatres Just Before Sailing to America.

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"What was it that reached out of the great waters and plucked Marie Empress from the liner's deck? What subtle spell—what promise of surcease of sorrow—came from the black and racing waves that night luring her to death in their icy arms?"

Photo by WHITE

The Lost Actress in Her Role of English "Chappie"—One of Her Most Successful Impersonations.

AT 6 o'clock on the evening of October 26 one of the stewardesses of the Cunard Line's great passenger ship "Orduna" knocked at the door of Stateroom 480. The ship was then two and a half hours out from Halifax on its way to its destination, New York.

The occupant of Stateroom 480, outside whose door the stewardess stood, was known on the stage as Marie Empress. She was in reality the great-grandniece of Edmund Kean, one of the greatest tragedians of the English stage, and Kean was her real name. Marie Empress was a comedienne, a favorite of the London music halls and on her way to conquer, if she could, the stage in America.

She was young, exceedingly attractive, alone, and, so far as any of her fellow passengers could see, untroubled.

The stewardess was bringing her a little dinner. At 6:30 she returned, carried away the dishes and received instructions to come back at half-past nine with sandwiches, which it was Miss Empress's custom to eat before retiring.

At precisely 9:30 the stewardess knocked at the door; receiving no reply she entered. The stateroom was empty. Thinking that the actress had gone to some other part of the ship she left the sandwiches.

At the usual time next morning she again knocked at the door of Stateroom 480; again receiving no reply she peeped in. There was no one there. The sandwiches lay untouched. The bed had not been slept in. Everything was exactly the same as it had been at 9:30 on the evening before when she had closed the door behind her.

A search was immediately made of the ship. No trace of Marie Empress could be found, nor any one who had seen her.

Sometime between 6:30 and 9:30 Marie Empress had vanished absolutely from the "Orduna."

Now the mystery of a disappearance from a ship at sea possesses elements of fascination no other has. The sea itself is mysterious. A man afloat on it and within the power of its ever shifting and tremendous moods is never entirely unaware of its threat of unknown forces. This it is that made the Psalmist sing: "They go down to the sea in ships that do business in great waters. These see the works of the Lord and his wonders in the deep."

Even on the greatest of ships, surrounded by his kind, man feels the immensity about him. And it is, probably, the recognition of the vast distances, the appalling power against which a man's strength is like the beating of a fly's wing in the tempest that sets a disappearance at sea as a thing apart from all others.

What was it that reached out of the great waters and plucked Marie Empress from the liner? What subtle spell—what promise of surcease of sorrow—came from the black and racing waves that night luring her to death in their icy arms? And how, from this well-lighted, carefully-watched ship, could she vanish without a single living soul having seen her?

Stateroom 480 is on what is known as "B" deck of the "Orduna." It has a door which opens into a passageway. Its one window is a thirteen-inch-wide porthole, far too small for a woman of Marie Empress's build to have passed through. It is only a foot and a half from the ceiling of the stateroom and opens out upon the sheer fall of the hull to the water. There was no gallery outside it.

And the porthole was locked from within!

To have gone on deck Marie Empress would have had to traverse several passageways in which people were constantly going and coming at this hour of the evening. She would have had to pass through several salons, always at least half filled, and the actress was of sufficiently striking personality not to have been able to slip through unobserved. To gain the decks she would also have had to pass by various stewards and officers, and, finally, having gotten there, it seems almost impossible that she could have slipped unnoticed to the rail and thrown herself over. All the decks and promenades are brilliantly lighted until long past the hour when she must have disappeared from the ship.

Here enters the first element of the mystery of Stateroom 480. How did Marie Empress leave the ship? Closely follows the second element—why?

The only person whom she seems to have made her confidante is the thin, little, gray-haired stewardess who waited upon her.

"She was dressed in black," said this woman, "with a little hat and a big veil, all black. I thought she might be a war widow. I said, 'Are you Miss or Mrs.?' She answered, 'I have never married, but I may soon.' I said, 'That's nice if you marry the right one.' And she answered, 'That's so; if you marry the right one!' But she didn't say anything more about marriage.

"She used to wonder where she would stop in New York. 'I really haven't any friends there,' she said, 'and I don't know where I'll stay.' I said, 'There are plenty of fine hotels. And the taxicabs will take you right there.' 'That's true,' she answered, in kind of an absent way. But lots of ladies have talked that way to me before landing.

"She said once that she hadn't been very well. There was a little mark, a red line, that ran straight across the side of her nose. She said she had got that hurt in an automobile accident. She said, 'When I get to New York I'm going to an hospital to be treated for it.'

"She seemed cheerful enough. She would make little jokes while I sewed the rips in her clothes. We had several laughs together about things I've forgotten. She seemed just like any other lady who was making the crossing, except that she was better looking and better humored.

"We left Halifax at half-past three in the afternoon Saturday. At 6 I rapped on the door and asked her if she wanted anything. At first she said, 'I don't feel very well and don't believe I'll take anything.' I insisted, and she said, 'All right, a little bit of chicken,' and I brought it her on a tray. When I came back to get the tray it was cleared. I said, "You did eat it, then.' She answered, 'Yes. Thank you. It was very nice.' 'Will you have sandwiches for the night?' I asked, and she said, 'Yes.' I made up her room and set out the sandwiches at half-past nine o'clock. She wasn't in her room. I thought she'd gone on deck. The next morning I tapped on the door. There wasn't any answer and I went in. Her bed hadn't been touched. I reported to the captain. He had the ship searched from stern to bow three times. There wasn't a sign of her. No one remembered having seen her.

"And the room was just as you see it now."

Nothing in all of this shows that the famous Kean's great-grandniece had gone on board contemplating suicide. Besides, there is other evidence that she did not.

In a rack above her berth were a number of photographs of herself—apparently placed aside to be given to press representatives on her arrival in New York. To the proprietor of an hotel at which she had formerly lived she sent from Halifax a cable:

"Arrive Monday. Please have room for me."

Certainly when she left Nova Scotia she had no thought of ending her career.

What was it that happened between 6:30 and 9:30 that night which swept her out of the ken of man?

The first possibility that occurs to the mind is, of course, love. Was there a broken romance, some one with whom she had parted in England and had parted, as perhaps she thought, forever? In the night did it seem to her that life without love was not worth living, and did the sighing of the waters as the ship cleaved through them bring to her the irresistible suggestion of finding forgetfulness within them? There is nothing, not a scrap of evidence, to show that such a love affair existed.

Did her courage fail her when within a day's sail of the city she hoped to conquer? For once she had failed here. She had played a small part with Lew Fields. She had played at Hammerstein's Victoria. When the Grand Opera House was converted temporarily into a music hall Miss Empress was the headliner. Then that happened which rarely happens in an American playhouse. The gallery booed her. Cat-calls accompanied one of her songs. The song was melodious and the singer was rarely beautiful, but the gallery disapproved of her love scenes with her pianist, Con Conrad. It thought them too realistic. The curtain was rung down. The pianist and the piano were moved below the stage, and Miss Empress resumed her songs.

"America is savage. I can never conquer it," she said after this unusual scene.

Could it be that, thinking of the past, she felt the battle before her to be too great for her strength, and in a moment of weakness and depression cast herself away?

There is the curious factor of the scar upon her face. A few years ago she appeared with this mark running along her neck from ear to chin. It was like a birthmark—or like the slash of a sharp knife! She managed to conceal it by the arrangement of her hair and by collars and neck swathings. On the stage, of course, the make-up hid it entirely. She, herself, said that she had received that scar in an automobile accident. Her oldest friends of that time said that it was the mark left by an attempt at suicide.

Whence came the smaller scar which the stewardess saw on the side of her nose, and have these two things any bearing upon the mystery of Stateroom 480?

"Maybe she was a stowaway. She could have slipped into men's clothes and hidden in the hold," said a petty officer. "There were men's clothes in her belongings. Maybe she got tired of a woman's life and thought she'd try a man's for a while. She could pass as a man without any trouble. She'd been a male impersonator." But this the high officers of the "Orduna" ridicule.

"She was too young and lovely to have sought such a death of her own will," said Walter Hast, who had been her fellow actor in Manchester. "But we must not forget the lure of the black waters at night. It is like the call of a lover to the romantic, or like the pull of gravity from a high building to the imaginative."

"Perhaps she had been seized by the Great Misgiving," said a fellow passenger. "Everyone is sometimes visited by it unless he or she is a multi-millionaire. She may have feared to start again in the world's most critical city where once before she had failed."

"Could it have been murder?" asked the speculative. "Her life had held some grand passions. There had been bitter quarrels at parting. Might not one of her discarded suitors have walked the deck with her for a final farewell, and made it, indeed, final? It would be easy to push one overboard. Or might not one of the lovers who had a wish to end her life have sent an emissary aboard to accomplish the deed?"

There is still another possibility—as sinister as any. It is said by friends that during her first American tour Marie Empress fell violently in love with a musician in New York. After the partial, at least, collapse of her ambition the circumstances preyed so upon her mind that she sought forgetfulness in drugs. Soon after this came a parting between her and the man she loved. The drug habit was not broken, it is said.

It may be that in the loneliness of her stateroom, only a day away from New York with its memories and problems, the actress again sought respite from her thoughts, and in a walking stupor threw herself into the ocean.

But the little empty stateroom No. 480 is silent.

And none can read the message of the waves that lap the sides of the hull of the "Orduna."